

# REVIEW

## “It’s Like Waiting for a Bus”: Two Books about *Our Man in Havana*

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Jon Wise

Sarah Rainsford, *Our Woman Down in Havana: Reporting Castro’s Cuba*. London: OneWorld Publications, 2018.

The job title “BBC Radio Foreign Correspondent” still evokes for many a romantic yet totally outdated image: a crackling voice intermittently audible over the ether as a world-changing event unfolds in a far-distant corner of the globe. The twenty-first-century reality of instant communication is quite different of course. But the joys and frustrations of distilling both the important and the trivial, to give those at home a flavor of a very different culture in the course of a ten-minute report or an even shorter soundbite, must have remained unaltered.

Sarah Rainsford was about to make her first broadcast from Cuba, as she recounts in her memoir, when her continuity presenter announced: “Now it’s over to Sarah Rainsford, *Our Woman in Havana*.” And apparently the label stuck. The reference to Greene’s work establishes an integral theme in this account of the correspondent’s four-year tenure on the island between 2011-2014. Rainsford claims that she was guided by Greene’s novel as she sought to discover what had changed in the intervening six decades since *Our Man in Havana* was first published.

Rainsford covers a host of different aspects of Cuban society in her quest to portray the effects of Fidel Castro’s lengthy socialist experiment in the face of intense economic and political pressure from its giant capitalist neighbor just ninety miles away across the Florida Straits. Her findings, for supporters of the Communist ideal, are often depressingly negative. Rainsford recounts details of the poverty, the decaying infrastructure, the scramble to leave the island, the shortages of essential goods, and the constant fear of speaking your mind. Against that she rightly balances the high standard of education, the free health service, and the underlying equality within Cuban society. Above all, there is the unquenchable *joie de vivre* of the islanders that has remained uncrushed through the years, typified by a love of music and dance. This spirit shines through, as does the insistence of the older generation who have stayed the course, that life is so much better than under the cruelly repressive dictator Fulgencio Batista, whom the revolutionaries finally ousted in 1959.

Of course, Greene’s portrayal is based on pre-revolutionary Cuba with its principally American holiday clientele drawn by the tropical sun, the daiquiris, and a Havana where every vice was permissible. The writer always claimed that his entertainment was principally written as a sly dig at his old employers, the Special Intelligence Service (later MI6). Nevertheless, his unswerving eye for detail and factual accuracy are still evident as Rainsford traces his footsteps with the aid of the book and an unpublished and incomplete journal Greene kept during his visit. She makes significant discoveries: the site of Wormold’s shop and of Milly’s school (she even finds a nun who was educated

there), as well as those bars and hotels that featured in both the novel and the film—and still survive.

The film was shot shortly after the successful revolution, and Rainsford recounts that although the presence of heavily armed, bearded revolutionaries added a certain piquancy, the filming was allowed to proceed without interruption in those comparatively liberal, early years of the revolution when Castro sought cooperation rather than confrontation with a suspicious capitalist world.

Rainsford's narrative, gleaned from her personal notebooks, is delivered in a distinctly succinct journalistic style. Indeed, her economy of language and acute powers of description are mindful of Greene himself. Despite being a thoroughly objective and professional account of a bureaucratic, contradictory, and often secretive society, one detects a deep personal affection for this tragic yet strangely comedic island and its long-suffering and beguiling people. No wonder Graham Greene was drawn to it.

(This review was first published in *A Sort of Newsletter*, November 2018)

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